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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

**John Dryden**  
**and a British Academy**

By

**Professor Oliver Farrar Emerson**

(Western Reserve University, U.S.A.)

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# JOHN DRYDEN

## AND A BRITISH ACADEMY

BY PROFESSOR O. F. EMERSON  
(Western Reserve University, U.S.A.)

*Communicated January 26, 1921*

THE chartering of a British Academy in 1902 lends added interest to preceding suggestions of founding such an institution. One of these has already been presented in the excellent account by Miss Edith M. Portal of the *Academ Roial of King James I*, as detailed in the *Proceedings* of 1915-16.<sup>1</sup> This attempt of Edmund Bolton to found a British Academy in 1614 was under the influence of the continental Academies, especially those of Italy, although he might have followed, had he known of it, the example of a great Englishman in a long past age. The first French Academy was established by the English Alcuin (Alcwine), whom Charlemagne had called to France in 782 in order to supervise reforms in Education.

After the establishment of the French Academy in 1635 it was natural, especially considering the strong French influence upon England during the reigns of the Charles Stuarts, that an Academy for England should have been proposed. It is even said that, in the very year of the French Academy's founding, a somewhat similar institution was suggested, a Minerva's Museum under the patronage of Charles I, but the suggestion came to nothing. By far the most important of these proposals for a British Academy in the seventeenth century is connected with a far greater name in English literary annals than that of Edmund Bolton, although the connexion has never been made as clear as might have been done. Thus, the first proposal in the second half of the seventeenth century has always been associated with the appointment of a committee by the Royal Society in 1664,

<sup>1</sup> Compare *Archaeologia*, xxxii, 148, for an earlier discussion of that attempt. For a general treatment of the whole subject, see 'An English Academy' by B. S. Monroe in *Modern Philology*, viii, 107, and for a still earlier brief consideration the writer's *History of the English Language*, pp. 90-93. See also Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ii, 337; Flügel, *Anglia*, xxxii, 261.



while another, sometimes placed in the same decade, has been attributed exclusively to the Earl of Roscommon. Unquestionably the first, and probably the second as I shall hope to show, is to be more directly attributed to one of the greatest men in the English literature of the period, the poet, dramatist, miscellaneous essayist John Dryden.

To deal with the first proposal, a lack of regard for chronological sequence has obscured the importance of Dryden's suggestion of a British Academy in the *Dedication* of the *Rival Ladies*. Writing of the language of the play, in which he questions with becoming modesty whether he has been as careful as he ought, he says:

I am sorry that, speaking so noble a language as we do, we have not a more certain Measure of it, as they have in France: where they have an 'Academy' erected for that purpose, and endowed with large privileges by the present King.

Now the *Rival Ladies*, probably produced in the latter part of 1663, was 'entered on the Stationers' Books June 5, 1664' (Malone in *Prose Works of Dryden*, i, 57), and doubtless published shortly thereafter. As Malone points out, it was not usual to publish plays until they 'had run their course on the stage'. The entry on the Stationers' Books, with the accompanying proposal of Dryden in the *Dedication*, antedated the appointment of the Royal Society's committee on the improvement of English by almost exactly six months, and the actual issue of the play and *Dedication* by several months at least. The Royal Society's move in the matter did not occur until December 7, 1664.

Dryden had been made a member of the Royal Society as early as November 26, 1662, the year of receiving its royal charter. It may be, therefore, that he was the first to mention, in conversation with his fellow members, the idea of a British Academy. At least the language of the Society's vote, considering Dryden's advocacy already published, may indicate that Dryden was partly in mind in appointing the committee. The vote of the Society reads:

It being suggested that there were persons of the Society whose genius was very proper and inclined to improve the English tongue, and particularly for philosophical purposes, it was voted that there should be a committee for improving the English language; and that they meet at Sir Peter Wyche's lodgings in Grays-Inn once or twice a month, and give an account of their proceedings when called upon. The persons following, or any three or more of them, were nominated to constitute the committee: Mr. Aershire, Sir Robert Atkins, Mr. Austen, Sir John Birkenhead, Dr. Clarke, Dr. Crowne, Mr. Dryden, Mr. Ellise, Mr. Evelyn, Sir John Finch, Mr. Godolphin,

Mr. Henshaw, Mr. Hoskins, Mr. Neile, Sir Thomas Notte, Mr. Sprat, Mr. Southwell, Sir Samuel Tuke, Mr. Waller, Mr. Williamson, Mr. Matthew Wren. It was ordered that this committee at their first meeting choose a chairman out of their number.—Birch's *History of the Royal Society*, i, 499.

Although not specifically made a member of the committee by this record, Sir Peter Wyche was made chairman, the committee thus consisting of twenty-two members, not twenty-one as sometimes stated.

As will be seen the committee included, besides Dryden, only the poet Waller of those who would now be considered as having the 'genius' 'very proper and inclined' to the subject of the vote. But Waller, as we know from his own statement some years later, was not active in the Royal Society at any time. In 1682 he was in arrears for his annual dues, and when called upon pleaded that 'he, being perpetually in parliament, had never been able to attend the Society, either to serve them or receive any advantage thereby'. The record is in Birch, vol. iv, p. 130, and in confirmation we have the testimony of Clarendon that Waller was 'nursed in parliaments', his membership having begun as early as 1621, when he was only sixteen years of age.

On the other hand Dryden, who had already publicly suggested a British Academy after the French model, was through life an avowed believer in improving English by some such means. Besides, Dryden was in other respects strongly under French influence. He had written the *Rival Ladies* in rimed verse, and vigorously defended rime in the dedication. He had already collaborated with Sir Robert Howard in producing the *Indian Queen* in the same form, and he was almost immediately to enter the controversy which produced his famous *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (written in part in 1665), and his *Defence of the Essay* (1668). In any case, to Dryden alone belongs the first public advocacy of an Academy for England, after that of France had taken up its labours. Indeed, the first public advocacy in the seventeenth century one may say, since Richard Carew's suggestion of 1605 was in a private letter, and Bolton's elaborate proposal was not actually published until long after Dryden's day, that is in *Archæologia*, xxxii, 124, December 17, 1846.

How far at this time Dryden had thought out the work of a British Academy is not clear. Later he twice mentioned a dictionary and a grammar as essential, and twice a *prosodia*, on which he is known to have made some progress as a favourite study, although nothing was ever published. From another member of the Royal Society's

committee we have a more extended record of what he thought a British Academy should undertake. John Evelyn, in a letter to the chairman Sir Peter Wyche (June 20, 1665), makes an even dozen suggestions for such an institution. From the letter we learn that the meetings of the committee had been appointed for Tuesday afternoons, and that, on account of his duties as government Commissioner for Kent in charge of the sick and prisoners in the Dutch War, Evelyn could not meet with his fellow members. On this account, 'to save the imputation of being unwilling to labour', he sends what he calls 'these indigested thoughts' the importance of which deserves statement in his own words:

I conceive the reason both of additions to, and the corruption of the English Language, as of most other tongues, has proceeded from the same causes; namely, from Victories, Plantations, Frontieres, Staples of Comerce, pedantry of Schooles, Affectation of Travellers, Translations, Fancy and style of Court, Vernility & mincing of Citizens, Pulpits, Political Remonstrances, Theaters, Shoppes, &c.

The parts affected with it we find to be the Accent, Analogy, direct Interpretation, Tropes, Phrases, and the like.

1. I would therefore humbly propose that there might first be compil'd a Gram'ar for the Præcepts; which (as did the Romans, when Crates transferr'd the art to that city, follow'd by Diomedes, Priscianus and others who undertooke it) might onely insist on the Rules, the sole meanes to render it a learned, & learnable tongue.

2. That with this a more certaine Orthography were introduc'd, as by leaving out superfluous lettres, &c.: such as *o* in Woomen, People; *u* in Honour; *a* in Reproach; *ugh* in Though, &c.

3. That there might be invented some new Periods and Accents, besides such as our Gram'arians & Critics use, to assist, inspirit, and modifie the Pronunciation of Sentences, & to stand as markes beforehand how the voice & tone is to be govern'd; as in reciting of Playes, reading of Verses, &c. for the varying the tone of the voyce, and affections, &c.

4. To this might follow a Lexicon or Collection of all the pure English-Words by themselves; then those which are derivative from others, with their prime, certaine and natural signification; then, the symbolical: so as no innovation might be us'd or favour'd; at least 'till there should arise some necessity of providing a new Edition, & of amplifying the old upon mature advice.

5. That in order to this, some were appointed to collect all the technical Words; especially those of the more generous employments: as the Author of the '*Essaies des Merveilles de la Nature, et des plus nobles Artifices*' has done for the French; Francis Junius and others have endeavour'd for the Latine: but this must be gleaned from Shops, not Bookes; and has ben of late attempted by Mr. Moxon.

6. That thinges difficult to be translated or express'd, and such as



are as it were incom'mensurable one to another; as determinations of Weights and Measures; Coines, Honors, National Habits, Armes, Dishes, Drinkes, Municipal Constitutions of Courts; old and abrogated Costomes, &c. were better interpreted than as yet we find them in Dictionaries, Glossaries, & noted in the Lexicon.

7. That a full Catalogue of exotic Words, such as are daily minted by our *Logodactili*, were exhibited, and that it were resolved on what should be sufficient to render them currant, *ut Civitate domentur*; since without restraining that same *indomitam novandi verba licentiam*, it will in time quite disguise the Language. There are some elegant words introduc'd by Physitians chiefly and Philosophers, worthy to be retained; others, it may be fitter to be abrogated; since there ought to be a law, as well as a liberty in this particular. And in this choyce, there would be some regard had to the well sounding, and more harmonious words, and such as are numerous, and apt to fall gracefully into their cadences and periods, and so reccom'end themselves at the very first sight as it were; others, which (like false stones) will never shine, in whatever light they are placed; but embase the rest. And here I note, that such as have lived long in Universities doe greatly affect words and expressions no where in use besides, as may be observed in Cleaveland's Poems for Cambridge; and there are also some Oxford words us'd by others, as I might instance in severall.

8. Previous to this it would be inquir'd what particular Dialects, Idioms and Proverbs were in use in every several Country [County] of England; for the Words of the present age being properly the *Vernacula*, or Classic rather, special regard is to be had of them, and this consideration admits of infinite improvements.

9. And happily it were not amisse, that we had a Collection of the most quaint and Courtly expressions, by way of *Florilegium*, or Phrases distinct from the Proverbs: for we are infinitely defective as to civil addresses, excuses & formes upon suddaine and unpremeditated (though ordinary) encounters: in which the French, Italian & Spanyards have a kind of natural grace & talent, which furnishes the conversation, and renders it very agreeable: here may come in Synonimes, Homoinymes, &c.

10. And since there is likewise a manifest rotation and circling of Words, which goe in & out like the mode & fashion; Bookes would be consulted for the reduction of some of the old layd-aside words and expressions had formerly in *delicijs*; for our Language is in some places sterile and barren, by reason of this depopulation, as I may call it; and therefore such places should be new cultivated, and enrich'd either with the former (if significant) or some other: For example, we have hardly any words that do so fully expresse the French *clinquant*, *naïveté*, *emuy*, *bizarre*, *concert*, *façoniére*, *chicaneries*, *consummé*, *emotion*, *defer*, *effort*, *chocq*, *entours*, *débouche*; or the Italian *vaghezza*, *garbato*, *svelto*, &c. Let us therefore (as the Romans did the Greeke), make as many of these do homage as are like to prove good citizens.

11. Something might likewise be well translated out of the best

Orators & Poets, Greek and Latin, and even out of the Moderne Languages; that so some judgement might be made concerning the Elegancy of the style, and so a laudable & unaffected imitation of the best be recommended to Writers.

12. Finally, There must be a stock of reputation gain'd by some publick Writings and Compositions of the Members of this Assembly, that so others may not thinke it dishonor to come under the test, or accept them for judges and approbators: And if the designe were arriv'd so far, I conceive a very small matter would dispatch the art of Rhetoric, which the French propos'd as one of the first things they recommended to their late Academicians.

These suggestions of the far-seeing Evelyn are wonderfully like a foretaste of the *New English Dictionary*, the *English Dialect Dictionary*, and other modern works of reference.

As is well known, the project of the Royal Society fell through. Various things, some quite extraordinary in themselves, account for this, and are indicated in part by another passage from Evelyn. In a letter to Pepys (August 12, 1689), Evelyn says of the committee's undertaking:

But by the death of the incomparable Mr. Cowley, distance and inconvenience of the place [that is, of the committee's meetings], the contagion and other circumstances intervening, it crumbled away and came to nothing.

Evelyn was writing, it will be seen, almost a quarter century after the Royal Society's committee had been appointed, and he puts together without chronological sequence several reasons for the project's failure. The 'distance and inconvenience of the place' of meeting, Gray's Inn the lodging of Sir Peter Wyche the chairman, may have been a minor reason for the committee's inactivity in the winter of 1664-5. Yet more important must be counted 'the contagion', or Great Plague, which broke out in the very month of the committee's appointment, December 1664, and caused a general derangement of London life in the early part of 1665. The theatres were closed in May and remained closed for more than a year and a half. The Court, and all who could get away, retired to the country. Milton spent the summer at Chalfont St. Giles, and Dryden went to his father-in-law's home at Charlton, Wiltshire, where, as he tells us in the Dedication, writing his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* 'served as an amusement'. The Royal Society itself suspended its weekly meetings on June 28, and did not resume them until March 14, 1666, according to Weld's *History of the Royal Society*, i, pp. 182, 190).

The 'other circumstances intervening' may well have included the opening of the Dutch War in 1665, and its active prosecution into the summer of 1666. The Plague also continued in the latter year,

and hardly had it begun to spend its force when, on September 2, the Great Fire laid waste London homes and public buildings. So great was the need that Gresham College, the meeting-place of the Royal Society, was 'restored to its original use and made an Exchange', as Sprat tells us in his *History of the Society* (p. 253). He adds that Henry Howard of Norfolk offered for its use his own home, Arundel House, but meetings of the Society were again given up for a time. The rebuilding of London occupied men's assiduous attention, and the establishment of a British Academy gave way before this far more pressing matter.

The one other event mentioned by Evelyn as contributing to the crumbling away of the Royal Society's venture—'the death of the incomparable Mr. Cowley' July 28, 1667—deserves a word, in order to avoid a wrong impression. For here alone, in writing so many years after the fact, Evelyn was clearly in error. Although it is sometimes so stated, Cowley was not a member of the Society's committee, as shown by the record of Birch, and indeed on other accounts could not have taken an active part in the Society's deliberations at this time. Although made a member March 6, 1661, Cowley was not long actively engaged with it. He was not in the list of Fellows drawn up May 20, 1663, and probably for a very good reason. Neglected by the king, for whom he had written his *Song of Triumph* and whose father he had served so faithfully, the melancholy Cowley, as he styles himself in his *Complaint*, had already retired in disappointment to Barn Elms, Surrey, where Evelyn visited him as early as May 14 of that year, and where he remained in retirement until his death. Indeed, except for the implication of Evelyn's remark, we have no knowledge of Cowley's interest in a British Academy, although his relation to the founding of the Royal Society is well known. In the notice of his death (Birch, *Hist. of Roy. Soc.* ii, 220), there is no reference to his concern in the project for which the committee had been appointed.

## II

The probable relation of Dryden to the next plea for a British Academy has been wholly overlooked in discussions of the subject. That plea was made by Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society*, published in 1667. Yet here develops a curious fact not hitherto noted. Part of Sprat's *History*, as he tells us in the *Advertisement to the Reader*, had been 'written and printed above two years before the rest'. Again, at Section XXI (p. 120) of the Second Part, Sprat says:

Thus far was I come in my intended work when my hand was stop'd and my mind disturb'd from writing by the two greatest disasters that ever befel our Nation, the fatal infection, which overspread the City of London in Sixty five; and the dreadful firing of the City itself in the year insuing.

Now Sprat's digression, as he calls it, to urge the founding of an Academy for England, is in the first part of the *History*, and thus in the part first printed. 'Above two years' before the writing of the last part, and the publication of the whole in 1667, puts the printing of the first and most of the second part as early as the first months of 1665, when the 'fatal infection' was well advanced. Probably it was in the preceding year, as indicated by other evidence.

For one thing, Sprat makes no mention of the Royal Society's appointment of a committee with something like the purpose of a British Academy. This is almost conclusive proof that this part of the book must have been written and probably printed before December, 1664. Other evidence for this view is also at hand. In the first months of 1664 Sprat had been engaged on another undertaking. Early in that year Sorbière had printed his *Relation d'un Voyage en Angleterre*, in which he had criticized the English in no uncertain terms. Sprat immediately prepared a biting answer, called *Observations on M. de Sorbier's Voyage into England*, the Dedication of which is dated August 1, 1664. We may reasonably assume, therefore, that Sprat began his *History* only after completing his answer to Sorbière. He would thus have had ample time to write the first part before the Royal Society had appointed its committee in December. It as naturally follows that Dryden's *Dedication* to the *Rival Ladies* must have been printed before Sprat had proceeded far with his *History*. In all probability, also, he was encouraged to make his recommendation of a British Academy by the public advocacy of Dryden.

The suggestion of Sprat seems to have had but little influence. Perhaps this was partly because the Royal Society at this time had itself fallen under severe criticism. Sprat devoted a large portion of his *History* to the 'Detractors of so noble an institution'. The Third Part is 'given up to asserting at length 'the Advantage and Innocence of the work, in respect to all the Professions, and especially of Religion'. Sprat tried to show that experimental science did not injure education, the Christian religion, or the Church of England. Notwithstanding this defence, however, the eminent Restoration preacher Robert South, at the dedication of the Sheldonian Theatre Oxford in 1669, ridiculed the work of the Royal Society, and



Sprat's *History* was attacked by Henry Stubbe in three pamphlets of 1670. It was the seventeenth-century phase of the warfare between science and religion.

### III

For the third suggestion of a British Academy in the second half of the seventeenth century, entire credit has always been given to Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon. In fact he founded a Society with some such end in view, although its establishment has been variously placed in time. Johnson's *Roscommon*, in his *Lives of the Poets*, is responsible for bringing it into closer relation to Dryden's first advocacy than is warranted. Following him, Malone in his *Prose Works of Dryden* (vol. i, Pt. II, p. 9) says:

Some years after this Dedication was written [that is Dryden's *Dedication to the Rival Ladies*] Lord Roscommon, as Fenton informs us, . . . formed the plan of a Society for refining our language and fixing its standards.

Johnson's *Life* also led Monroe (*Mod. Phil.* viii, 107) to place the founding of the Roscommon Academy with great definiteness 'about 1662', thus antedating Dryden's first proposal. But Johnson, as we can now see, was merely using with great freedom Fenton's note on Waller's poem *Upon the Earl of Roscommon's Translation of Horace, De Arte Poetica* (*Works of Edmund Waller*, p. lxxvi). He had made no independent investigation.

The reference to Roscommon's Society as of 'about 1662' rests on Johnson's apparent connexion of it with the Earl's first marriage in April of that year. Fenton, to whom it is best to go at once, is by no means so definite. Instead of making a biography, as Johnson was doing, he was merely writing a note to one of Waller's poems, and incidentally including some allusions to events in Roscommon's life. Though Fenton also places the following paragraph immediately after Roscommon's first marriage, neglecting entirely his second marriage a decade later (1673), he clearly connects the Society for 'refining' English with the last years of Roscommon's life. He says:

And about this time, in imitation of those learned and polite assemblies with which he had been acquainted abroad, particularly one at Caen (in which his Tutor Bochartus dy'd suddenly whilst he was delivering an Oration), he began to form a Society for the refining and fixing the standard of our language, in which design his great friend Mr. Dryden was a principal assistant. A design of which it is much easier to conceive an agreeable idea, than any rational hope ever to see it brought to perfection among us. This project, at least, was entirely defeated by the religious commotions that ensu'd

on King James's accession to the throne: at which time the Earl took a resolution to pass the remainder of his life at Rome; telling his friends it would be best to sit next the chimney when the chamber smok'd. Amid these reflections he was seized by the gout, and being too impatient of pain he permitted a bold French pretender to physic to apply a repelling medicine, in order to give him permanent relief; which drove the distemper into his bowels, and in a short time put a period to his life in the year 1634 [that is 1634/5, Roscommon's death occurring in January, 1685].

Fenton does not connect the founding of Roscommon's Society with 'his literary projects' as does Johnson, but the latter was doubtless right in this particular. All that we know of Roscommon's life in London up to 1680 indicates that the Court and gambling engrossed his attention. Only in the last four years of his life did he make a new and surprising reputation for himself as poet and critic, publishing his translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica* in 1680, and his poetical *Essay on Translated Verse* in 1684. The latter date is approximately the time with which Fenton connects the project which 'was entirely defeated by the religious commotions that ensu'd on King James's accession to the throne'. The only error is in relation to the latter fact. Charles II did not die until February 6, 1685, while on January 21 Roscommon had been buried with great pomp in Westminster Abbey.

Fenton's error with regard to the accession of James II cannot overthrow his general accuracy in attributing the failure of the Roscommon venture to the religious troubles attendant upon the possible accession of James, and to the gout which carried Roscommon off so near the death of Charles II. The 'religious commotions' continued from the passage of the Exclusion Bill by the Commons in October 1680, through the discovery of the Rye House Plot in 1683, to the end of Charles II's reign. During the later years especially, the thought of Englishmen was far removed from any such unessential to the country's safety as a British Academy of learned men. A second time important national events affected the latter project. But the connexion of the failure of Roscommon's Society with the religious troubles, King James's accession, and the gout which hastened Roscommon's death, is a clear indication that the Society which he founded on the model of that at Caen must have been close to the end of the Earl's life.

Meanwhile Dryden, who was the only man of his time to take a lifelong interest in the idea, had again brought forward the project of a British Academy in his *Dedication of Troilus and Cressida*, when that play was published in the early part of 1679. The occasion

seemed especially opportune. In February the Earl of Sunderland had been recalled from his ambassadorship in France to become Secretary of State, and his sister was the wife of Thomas Howard, the brother of Dryden's Lady Elizabeth. Sunderland was a man of such keenness of intellect that Dryden withheld the usual fulsome flattery of his dedications, while the new Secretary's former employment in France had already acquainted him with the work of the French Academy. He was ambitious in his new position. It seemed reasonable that Dryden might, with some chance of success, offer him the opportunity of rivalling the great French minister Richelieu, and become the patron of an English 'which foreigners may not disdain to learn'.

Malone, under the influence of Johnson as we have seen, ventures that in this proposal to Sunderland Dryden alluded to Roscommon's scheme, but I find no evidence to that effect. Fenton accords to Dryden the position of 'principal assistant' to Roscommon, but all the circumstances more naturally suggest that Dryden was again first to bring forward his earlier proposal, and that it was taken up by Roscommon and Dryden together. Their relations were especially cordial at this time. In the *Preface to Ovid's Epistles* (1680), Dryden quotes Roscommon's translation of Horace as 'excellently rendered'. Roscommon wrote complimentary verses for Dryden's *Religio Laici* of 1682. Dryden returned the compliment in verses *To the Earl of Roscommon upon his Essay on Translated Verse* in 1684, and he twice refers flatteringly to that work in the *Preface* to the *Second Miscellany* of 1685. It can scarcely be believed that, if Roscommon's Society had been in existence, Dryden would not have made some allusion to it in his Dedication to the Earl of Sunderland.

Dryden's *Dedication* of the *Troilus and Cressida* makes clearer than his former brief suggestion what he thought the necessary labour of a British Academy. He would have the great minister he was addressing .

Make our language as much indebted to his care, as the French is to the memory of their famous Richelieu. You know, my Lord, how low he laid the foundations of so great a work; that he began it with a Grammar and a Dictionary, without which all those remarks and observations which have since been made had been performed to as little purpose, as it would be to consider the furniture of the rooms before the contrivance of the house. Propriety must first be stated, ere any measures of elegance can be taken. Neither is one Vangelas sufficient for such a work; it was the employment of the whole Academy for many years; for the perfect knowledge of a tongue was never attained by any single person. The court, the college, and the town must be joined in it. And as our English is a composition of the

dead and the living tongues, there is required a perfect knowledge not only of Greek and Latin, but of the old German, the French, and the Italian; and to help all these, a conversation with those authors of our own who have written with the fewest faults in prose and verse. . . . I am desirous, if it were possible, that we might all write with the same certainty of words and purity of phrase to which the Italians first arrived, and after them the French; at least that we might advance so far as our tongue is capable of such a standard. . . . We are full of monosyllables, and those clogged with consonants; and our pronunciation is effeminate: all which are enemies to a sounding language. It is true that, to supply our poverty, we have trafficked with our neighbour nations, by which means we abound as much in words as Amsterdam does in religions; but to order them, and make them useful after their admission is the difficulty. A greater progress has been made in this since his majesty's return than perhaps since the conquest to his time. But the better part of the work remains unfinished; and that which has been done already, since it has only been in the practice of some few writers, must be digested into rules and method, before it can be profitable to the general.

Then comes the strong personal appeal, in a tone of such confidence as almost to imply some private understanding and encouragement:

Will your Lordship give me leave to speak out at last? and to acquaint the world, that from your encouragement and patronage we may one day expect to speak and write a language worthy of the English wit, and which foreigners may not disdain to learn. Your birth, your education, your natural endowments, the former employments which you have had abroad, and that which to the joy of good men you now exercise at home, seem all to conspire to this design: the genius of the nation seems to call you out, as it were by name, to polish and adorn your native language, and to take from it the reproach of its barbarity.

Dryden's eloquent appeal, as we know, was of no avail. Earlier in the *Dedication* he had pointed out that, before his peaceful project could be undertaken, 'the quiet of the nation must be secured, and a mutual trust betwixt prince and people be renewed'. That task, however, was to be too great for any man or group of men. Had Sunderland planned the founding of a British Academy, the 'religious commotions', as Fenton called them, and the generally unsettled state of the country would have hampered him, quite as it has been said to have defeated Roscommon's project. Besides, Sunderland lost his secretaryship in 1681, and although he regained it two years later he was clearly in no position to take up any unnecessary venture. Yet our interest is with the project, rather than with the failure. And it is but a tardy act of justice to the memory of the great poet, that we to-day recognize the renewed advocacy of a British Academy at this time as



initiated by Dryden himself, rather than by any other, and that we accord to him the praise of an exalted conception, even though it was to be unfulfilled for many years.

## IV

Nor is this all that may be placed to Dryden's credit in this connexion. To the end of his life something like a British Academy was in his mind. Twice again he was to refer to it publicly, though with less hope than when he wrote the *Dedication of Troilus and Cressida*. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Progress of Satire*, addressed to the Earl of Dorset in 1693, he says:

We have as yet no English *Prosodia*, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar; so that our language is in a manner barbarous; and what government will encourage any one or more who are capable of refining it, I know not: but nothing under a public expense can go through with it. And I rather fear a declination of the language, than hope an advancement of it in the present age.

In the *Dedication of the Third Miscellany* during the same year, he again mentions the project of a public effort, although again with some note of pessimism:

For after all our language is both copious, significant, and majestic, and might be reduced into a more harmonious sound. But for want of public encouragement in this iron age we are so far from making any progress in the improvement of our tongue, that in a few years we shall speak and write as barbarously as our neighbours.

Again, however imperfect may have been Dryden's idea of a British Academy, and the possibility of 'refining' English, one must be impressed with his frequently repeated interest in the English language, and in efforts to make it a better medium of expression. His proposals of an Academy for England are repeated during quite thirty years—in 1664, in 1679, and in 1693. He made important references to English, sometimes of praise and sometimes of blame it is true, in his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (written 1665); in the *Account of Annus Mirabilis* (1667); in the *Defence of the Epilogue* (1672); in the *Preface to Albion and Albanus*, and in that to the *Second Miscellany* (1685); in the *Preface to Don Sebastian* (1690); in the *Dedication to the Pastorals*, and the *Discourse on Epick Poetry* (1697); in the *Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), the year of his death. In addition, he has severe criticism of Sir Robert Howard's English in the *Defence of the Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), and that of Settle in *Remarks on the Emperor of Morocco* (1674).

Nor did Dryden offer precepts only. Conscious effort as a stylist was expressed as early as the *Dedicatory Epistle* to the *Rival Ladies* :

I have endeavoured to write English, as near as I could distinguish it from the tongue of pedants and that of affected travellers.

He more than once mentions correcting his own works, when new editions made that possible, for example the *Indian Emperor*, as noted in the *Defence of the Essay of Dramatick Poesie*. The considerable changes made in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, when it was reprinted in 1684, give notable testimony to the pains he took to improve his own style in prose. His best acknowledgement of care in regard to poetic technique is in the *Discourse of Epick Poetry*, where he says :

I have long had by me the materials of an English *Prosodia*, containing all the mechanical rules of Versification, wherein I have treated with some exactness of the feet, the quantities and the pauses.

It is a distinct misfortune that this first treatment of English Metrics by an Englishman, and a poet as well, was never printed, and is not now known to be in existence.

Finally, looking back on all his labours towards the end of his life, Dryden could reasonably assume of his influence what has since been freely acknowledged. Writing of our language and poetry in the *Postscript* to a *Discourse on Epick Poetry*, he says :

Somewhat (give me leave to say) I have added to both of them in the choice of words and harmony of numbers, which were wanting, especially the last, in all our poets, even in those who being endowed with genius yet have not cultivated their mother-tongue with sufficient care ; or, relying on the beauty of their thoughts, have judged the ornament of words and sweetness of sound unnecessary.

Again, writing to his cousin Mrs. Steward on June 9, 1699, less than a year before his death, Dryden hopes that the King and Court 'will consider me as a man who has done my best to improve the language, and especially the poetry'. It is not too much to believe, that the British Academy of the twentieth century will honour in no uncertain way this early and lifelong exponent of its high aims and purposes.









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